PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF COVID-19: INVESTIGATING TASK SETBACKS, BURNOUT, WITHDRAWAL BEHAVIOUR, AND PERCEIVED ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT AMONG TELEWORK EMPLOYEES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Task setbacks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and organisational support for teleworkers are newly emerging phenomena affecting the world of work and the workforce; thus, research on these phenomena is scarce. The switch from the conventional working mode to teleworking necessitates investigating it in relation to burnout and work withdrawal behaviour. Focusing on employees in Malaysia, the present study investigated how COVID-19 task setbacks, burnout, withdrawal behaviour, and organisational support interplay in impacting the well-being of teleworkers. Data were collected through a survey from 157 employees who were teleworking full-time due to the movement restrictions. The study found that while COVID-19 task setbacks did not predict employees' burnout, the latter was positively related to, and predictive of, work withdrawal behaviour. Employees' burnout was also negatively associated with perceived organisational support for telework tasks. Contrary to the hypothesis, perceived organisational support did not significantly buffer the relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour. Implications for future research, practical interventions, and potential work policy changes based on these findings were discussed.

Keywords: Burnout, perceived organisational support, task setbacks, telework, work withdrawal behaviour

Introduction

As in other countries, Malaysia has witnessed unprecedented changes in the world of work resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes include: (1) the shift to working from home, where people do their job remotely using technologies, such as Zoom, Microsoft Office Suite, G-Suite applications, Skype, and Slack; (2)

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the changing role of the office, where the concept of the workplace is no longer a centralised, brick and mortar building that necessitates physical presence; (3) the composition of the workforce, now made up of an exponential increase of the gig economy, temporary and contract jobs, as well as automation; and (4) the blurred boundary between home and office is reshaping the nine-to-five working hours due to the remote work.

Although these changes concern all employees, those who have to switch to full-time telework are more affected because of its sudden, abrupt, and large-scale uptake, leaving these employees neither the time, nor the option, or the resources to prepare for this mode of work (Chong et al., 2020). If these issues remain unresolved, they may exacerbate task setbacks (i.e., disruption or delay in performing work), creating additional stress and burnout for employees who are already struggling to keep pace with the varying demands caused by the pandemic.

For years, practitioners, researchers, and industries have advocated teleworking to complement conventional work arrangements (Mas & Pallais, 2020). Studies have shown that teleworking reduces job stress (Allen et al., 2015; Mnif & Rebai, 2021; Voulon, 2021); increases a sense of personal control, autonomy, and responsibility for work tasks (Allen et al., 2015; Beňo, 2021); contributes to better work performance and productivity (Galanti et al., 2021); improves commitment towards employers (Baert et al., 2020); and promotes higher levels of job and life satisfaction (Hashim et al., 2020; Pemble, 2020).

Ironically, while teleworking has afforded considerable benefits for employees and organisations, doing so in the COVID-19 pandemic has taken things to a whole new level as it has created unfamiliar problems that can disrupt employees' job scope and primary work activities. For example, educators have to think of creative, unconventional, and even experimental ways to conduct classes virtually (Selvanathan et al., 2020; Sulaiman et al., 2021); office managers have to find innovative ways to work under the strict standard operating procedures (Parker, 2020); organisations that have not practised telework in the past have to quickly establish and adapt work procedures to the new norm of teleworking (Williams, 2021); information and technology departments may not have the appropriate systems that can support remote work and collaborations in a secure manner (Frauenheim, 2020); or employees experience social isolation due to missing the interaction they used to have with colleagues in the office (Tavares et al., 2020; Lengen et al., 2021), among others.

All the mentioned-above issues may give rise to disruption in work-related tasks, costly operations, as well as changes in social relationships and personal well-being. These concerns are evident in a recent study by Chong et al. (2020) who found that disruption or delay in performing work-related tasks due to COVID-19 has negatively impacted on the psychological well-being and behavioural functioning of telework employees. In particular, within what they call "COVID-19 task setbacks", Chong et al. (2020) argued that issues or problems that disrupt the original work of

telework employees can drain employees' resources, leaving them burnt-out, and eventually, losing interest in continuing their tasks.

Of late, there has been a broadening interest in investigating the potential role that organisational support may play in telework implementation. Empirical research has adequately evinced that the extent to which employees believe that their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being – a phenomenon known as perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 1997) – can allay the negative impacts of job stress, burnout, and role ambiguity while transitioning or adapting to telework (Bentley et al., 2016; Masuda et al., 2017). Chong et al. (2020) explained that employees who experience burnout replenish their energy and resources from the organisational support that they receive while teleworking. Therefore, having solid administrative support is crucial for sustaining engaged and resilient employees.

While most studies published so far have investigated the effects of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic, none has explored how employees in Malaysia are coping with the current surge in telework. Therefore, we partially replicated Chong et al.'s (2020) study with a different set of data from telework employees in Malaysia to examine the relationships among task setbacks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, burnout, and work withdrawal. We also explored the potential moderating influence of perceived organisational support for telework on the burnout-work withdrawal relationship.

Literature Review

To illustrate the context of this study and the research area in which it took place, we begin by describing the nature of telework and reviewing its prevalence and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is followed by a discussion of how burnout, withdrawal behaviour, and organisational support may interplay in impacting the performance and well-being of teleworking employees. Finally, we discuss our framework for modelling the relationships among these variables and the generality of our approach.

Telework, COVID-19, and COVID-19 task setbacks

The term "telework" or "teleworking" refers to the activity of working at home or a location other than a conventional work location while communicating with the office by using technologies, such as the phone, email, or the Internet (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). Remote working, working at home, home-based work, telecommuting, and work from anywhere, are among the various concepts related to telework (International Labour Office, 2020). Although telework is not new in Malaysia, until 2012, there were no detailed work-life, family-friendly policies in the country.

In their review on work-life balance and flexible working arrangement policies in Malaysia, Noor and Mohd Mahudin (2015) argued that prior to 2012, these policies were scattered and were likely incorporated into the general labour or family policies. It was only after the 1Malaysia Family First Movement under the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS) initiatives in 2012 that the work-life balance policies, particularly the flexible work arrangements, became more visible. Nevertheless, despite implementing these policies, the adoption of flexible working arrangements has not significantly improved as there was a lack of effort and political will to mandate and enforce work-life balance in both public and private sectors (Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has compelled organisations and employees to adopt telework or the work-from-home mode so that the spread of the virus can be curbed, commuter density in public transportation can be reduced, and physical distancing guidelines can be adhered to (The National Security Council, 2020). The need to quickly adapt to the new work mode has resulted in unanticipated problems about how telework must be interpreted, negotiated, and implemented. These problems, together with the evolving and uncertain nature of the COVID-19 situation, can disrupt employees' workflow and job scope. Chong et al. (2020) described this task-related disruption as COVID-19 task setbacks, which include any constraint or disruptive event related to the COVID-19 and its management, transmission, and consequences on work operations. They also posited that COVID-19 task setbacks can exert adverse effects on the teleworkers' psychological, behavioural, and social well-being, including burnout and withdrawal behaviour.

COVID-19 task setbacks and employees' burnout

Burnout has always been one of the most studied topics in organisation, management, and applied psychology. Conceptualised as a psychological syndrome that results from long-term physical and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), burnout has been associated with negative telework and organisational outcomes. Studies such as those by Jimenez-Gomez et al. (2021) and Rigotti et al. (2020) have found that the movement control restrictions due to the pandemic have significantly led employees to experience burnout.

In other research, the feeling of being overworked due to teleworking has also been associated with burnout. For example, in a large-scale study involving 3.1 million respondents in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, DeFilippis et al. (2020) discovered that employees have been clocking more hours on the job and spending more time in work-related email activities than before the lockdowns in the said countries. Other studies have further corroborated these results in that teleworkers have reported being burnt-out due to overworking and adapting to new ways of working and the inability to balance between remote work and family life (Monster Survey, 2020; Sinclair et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2021; Tavares et al., 2020).

The Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) by Hobfoll (1989) is a sound basis for understanding and explaining stress and burnout in teleworkers. This theory suggests that people are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect their resources. However, when these resources are lost or depleted, stress will ensue, with accompanying negative consequences. Therefore, in the face of resource loss, people tend to want to replace or regain it with another resource that can provide a similar effect.

Recent studies that have utilised the COR Theory in investigating burnout within the COVID-19 pandemic context have notably reported a high incidence of burnout in teleworkers due to experiencing additional distractions during work hours and receiving less access to resources, such as support from organisations, which then affect their productivity and contribute to burnout (Jimenez-Gomez et al., 2021; Pulido-Martos et al. 2021). Viewed from the COR perspective too, Chong et al. (2020) posited that COVID-19 disruptions experienced by teleworkers have led to a depletion of resources (e.g., original job scope and perceived control over the situation, among others) and have reduced them to emotional exhaustion or burnout. When this situation happens, the employees turn to other sources to prevent further resource loss, suggesting a positive relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour.

Employees' burnout and work withdrawal behaviour

Work withdrawal behaviour refers to the behaviour of employees when they become physically or psychologically disengaged from their organisation (Rabbi et al., 2015). Such behaviour may include absenteeism, tardiness, withholding effort, taking unnecessary breaks, or turnover (Berry et al., 2011; Khawaja et al., 2021; Nauman et al., 2020; Spector et al., 2006). Chong et al. (2020) suggested that dealing with the ongoing stress resulting from the pandemic and digesting a new process and expectations associated with COVID-19 are draining and emotionally exhausting, which can lead to an increase in work withdrawal behaviour. They also added that employees working remotely are more susceptible to engage in withdrawal behaviour when experiencing burnout because of the less direct supervision from employers.

Various empirical evidence has shown that withdrawal behaviour is harmful and costly to organisations. For example, employee lateness costs UK businesses £9 billion a year (Heathrow Express, 2012), while employee absenteeism in the US costs organisations $225.8 billion each year or $1,685 per employee (CDC Foundation, 2015). Furthermore, the withdrawal behaviour of employees can harm the work motivation, morale, and attitude of their co-workers (Alexander, 2016; Roche & Haar, 2013). Given the high costs and adverse effects of work withdrawal, researchers must investigate the potential causes and ways to mitigate such behaviour. Therefore, Chong et al.'s (2020) findings that teleworkers who experience burnout but receive high support from their organisations are less likely to engage in withdrawal behaviour are essential because of the need for intervention and potential work policy changes are highlighted. The variable, i.e., organisational support, is discussed next.

Perceived organisational support as moderator between employees' burnout and work withdrawal behaviour

Past studies have regarded support from the organisation to be a valuable resource to reduce workplace deviant behaviour (Hammes & Walsh, 2017); increase safety compliance and safety participation (Guo et al., 2019); buffer against job exhaustion, psychological work withdrawal, workload, and emotional demands (Chong et al., 2020; van Woerkom et al. 2016); alleviate job insecurity experienced by employees (Guo et al., 2019); and induce high performance and commitment behaviour, ultimately reinforcing the employees to stay with the organisation (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In the context of telework during the COVID-19 crisis, such support entails providing employees with the necessary telework-related resources while working remotely, such as technical support, clear instructions, relevant work materials, and timely information, realistic duration, and authority to make decisions. Chong et al. (2020) described these initiatives as "organisational telework task support" that can act as a replenishing reservoir to help in overcoming the depleting job resources.

Drawing on the COR theory, employees who believe their organisation is supportive in helping them work from home will be more likely to replenish their resources after experiencing burnout from COVID-19 task setbacks (Chong et al., 2020). Early research in this field has indicated that support offered by organisations to employees could increase the latter's perceived control over stressors, thus enhancing their ability to cope with challenges and new information (Richardson et al., 2008).

In short, when an organisation is committed to its employees, the latter will reciprocate this perceived care with higher commitment to the organisation (Pattnaik et al., 2020). However, the same reactions may not occur if the organisation is indifferent or does not care about the employees. In this case, employees will feel isolated or emotionally alienated from their job and will not get the resources they need from the organisation to recover from the stressors (Chong et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2008). Therefore, it can be implied that teleworkers experiencing burnout could draw from organisational support as one of the external resources that can help them replenish their energy resources and reduce the tendency to engage in work withdrawal behaviour.

Based on the discussion above, the COR theory served as the conceptual model for this study in which the relationship between COVID-19 task setbacks and burnout (H1) and the relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour (H2) are tested. The potential role of perceived organisational support as a moderating variable that may lessen the impact of burnout on work withdrawal behaviour among teleworkers (H3) is also examined. This model is illustrated in Figure 1.
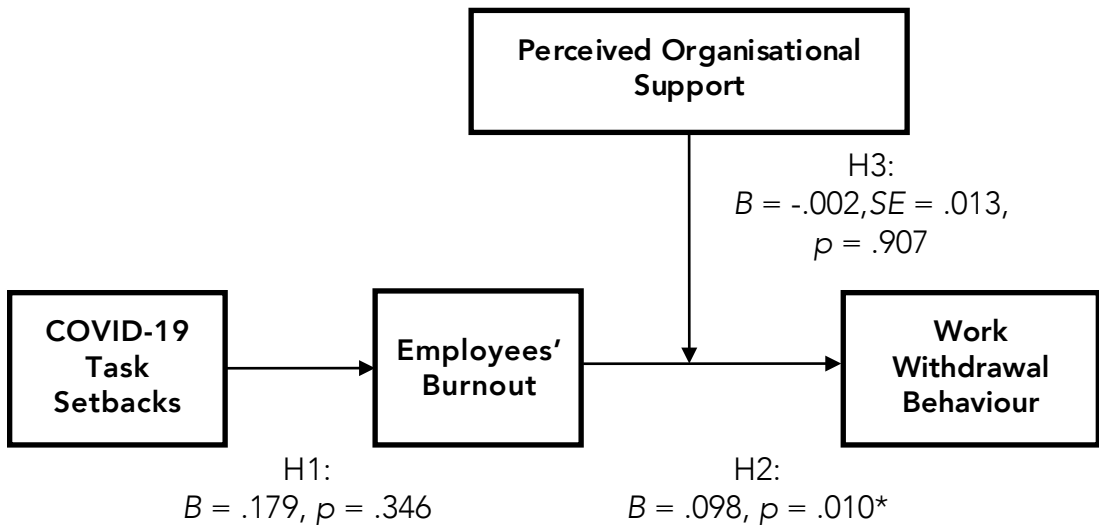
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking COVID-19 Task Setbacks, Burnout, Perceived Organisational Support, and Work Withdrawal Behaviour

Method

Study design and sampling procedure

Due to it being a new area of research, this study is a partial replication of Chong et al.'s (2020) research in terms of measures used and hypotheses tested. However, in contrast to Chong et al. (2020), whose data came from a 10-day daily diary investigation involving 120 telework employees, the present study only collected and analysed its data cross-sectionally without incorporating all variables in that study due to time and budgetary constraints.

The actual data of the research population in Malaysia, in terms of the composition of workers who have started teleworking or the increased level of teleworking that could be used as the basis for determining this study's population sample, are not readily available from public databases. For this reason, the researchers used convenience sampling to survey a broad range of teleworkers across different organisations, occupations, and locations in Malaysia. Although a convenience sampling technique was used, all participants met the inclusion criteria of (i) must be work-aged (18 to 60 years old); (ii) must be a Malaysian; and (iii) must have experience in teleworking due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection process commenced in November 2020 and ended in December 2020. Using the G*Power analysis programme (Faul et al., 2007; Faul et al., 2009) with a pre-set power of .95, α = .05, and two predictors and one moderator (i.e., COVID-19 task setbacks, burnout, and perceived organisational support), the sample of 157 obtained in this study exceeded the calculated minimum sample size of 107.

Measures

An online survey with five parts was created using Google Form. The first part consisted of demographics items, such as participants' gender, age, ethnicity, educational level, job type, work sector, location, and teleworking duration. In the second part, task setbacks (i.e., the setbacks caused by the COVID-19 situation, such as social distancing, lockdown regulations, and other impacts that did not exist previously) were measured by the Daily C19 Task Setbacks scale used in Chong et al.'s (2020) study. The scale consisted of three items, with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *A great deal*. Total scores were obtained, with higher scores indicating higher task setbacks.

The 16-item Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI: Demerouti et al., 2010), ranging from 1 = *Strongly agree* to 4 = *Strongly disagree*, was used to measure burnout, including its dimensions of exhaustion and detachment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12 were reversed. The total score was then calculated, with higher scores denoting higher burnout.

Meanwhile, perceived organisational support for telework tasks was measured using the three-item scale from Chong et al. (2020). Consistent with how previous research has measured this variable, a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1= *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*, was used to assess this variable. Again, total scores were computed, with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions that the organisations help or support the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last part, work withdrawal behaviour was measured using the Daily Work Withdrawal Behaviour scale employed in Chong et al.'s (2020) study. The scale assesses the elements of withdrawal behaviour, such as lateness and absenteeism across four items rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *A great deal*. Data were analysed using total scores, with higher scores representing higher work withdrawal behaviour.

The survey items were pilot-tested first with ten teleworkers who met the inclusion criteria to determine the suitability and clarity of the measures used in this study. These participants indicated that the items were clear and comprehensible; hence, no amendments to the questionnaire were necessary. Accordingly, the finalised version was used in the main study with 157 participants. The internal consistency for each scale was calculated, yielding Cronbach's alpha values of .79 for the Daily C19 Task Setbacks scale; .82 for the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory items; .85 for the organisational support for telework tasks; and .80 for the Daily Work Withdrawal Behaviour scale.

Procedure

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Department of Psychology, International Islamic University Malaysia. Each scale developer was contacted to get permission to use their scale. Next, recruitment posters that articulated the information about the study and a link to the online survey were distributed via e-mail and posted on several social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Participants were able to participate in the study from anywhere by connecting to the online Google Form, accessible via any mobile phone or computer connected to the Internet. The first page of the survey included informed consent and the objectives of the study. In the informed consent, response confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were assured. Once participants clicked the *"Agree"* button on the page, the survey items were presented. The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 21. After verifying the dataset for completeness of the responses, regression analyses were performed. In addition, moderation analysis was carried out using Hayes's PROCESS macro version 3.3 (Hayes, 2017; Model 1).

Results

Demographics results indicate that out of the 157 respondents who took part in the study, 117 were females (74.5%), and the remaining 40 were males (25.5%). Participants' mean age was 31.62 (SD = 10.395, range 18 - 60), with the majority of them being Malay (90.4%), followed by Chinese (4.5%), Indian (3.8%), and others (1.3%). One hundred and two participants (65%) work in the private sector, while 44 (28%) are in the government sector, and the remaining 7% either manage their own business or work in government-linked companies. Additionally, the vast majority of the participants are bachelor's degree holders (70.1%), followed by diploma or equivalent (16.6%), PhD or master's degree (7%), secondary school certificate (5.7%), and others (.6%).

Participants are from various states but mostly from Selangor (32.5%), Kuala Lumpur (31.2%), and Pahang (12.7%). The researchers categorised the participants' occupations according to the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations 2013 (Ministry of Human Resources, 2013). Based on this classification, most of the participants are professionals (52.9%), followed by managers (19.8%), clerical support (14.6%), technicians and associate professionals (8.9%), and service and sales personnel (3.8%). At the time of our study, participants had been teleworking, on average, for four and a half months (SD = 2.68), with a median of four months. While most participants had worked remotely for two or three months (39.5%), about 25.5% had been teleworking between seven to 12 months.

Next, the data were checked for normality, outliers, and missing values, as well as for assumptions of regression analysis. Visual inspection of the histograms revealed no dramatic aberrations from normality for COVID-19 task setbacks, burnout, and perceived organisational support scores. However, work withdrawal behaviour was slightly positively skewed, with more scores occurring at the lower end of the scale. Tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics showed that all values were within acceptable guidelines recommended by Field (2018), demonstrating that multicollinearity is not an issue. In addition, the Durbin-Watson values for all models were between 1.00 and 1.637, indicating that the residuals do not exhibit autocorrelation. Normal P-P plot also showed that all points are near to straight line, indicating a normal distribution of residuals.

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, correlations, and Cronbach's alpha for each variable, are presented in Table 1. The mean scores for COVID-19 Task Setbacks and Oldenburg Burnout Inventory are 10.09 (*SD* = 3.135) and 39.30 (*SD* = 7.42), respectively. On average, participants' work withdrawal behaviour score is 7.96 (*SD* = 3.58), with a mean of 10.31 (*SD* = 3.311) for perceived organisational support.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations Among the Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. COVID-19 task setbacks	10.09	3.14	-	.076	-.098	.134
2. Burnout	39.30	7.42		-	-.273**	.204*
3. Perceived organisational support	10.31	3.31			-	-.014
4. Work withdrawal behaviour	7.96	3.58				

Results show that COVID-19 task setbacks scores are not significantly correlated with other variables, i.e., burnout: r (155) = .076, p = .346, perceived organisational support: r (155) = -.098, p = .220, and work withdrawal behaviour: r (155) = .134, p = .094. However, a significant, negative relationship between burnout and perceived organisational support was obtained, r (155) = -.273, p = .001. In contrast, burnout is positively and significantly correlated with work withdrawal behaviour, r (155) = .204, p = .010.

The hypothesised relationships between COVID-19 task setbacks, burnout, and work withdrawal behaviour were further examined using regression analyses. Results indicate that the regression coefficients between COVID-19 task setbacks and burnout are not statistically significant (B = .179, β = .076, p = .346). Therefore, contrary to expectations, COVID-19 task setbacks did not significantly predict burnout. To test Hypothesis 2, we regressed burnout on work withdrawal behaviour and found a significant overall model, R^2 = .042, F (1, 155) = 6.74, p = .010. The regression coefficients between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour also yielded a statistically significant result (B = .098, β = .204, p = .010), suggesting the former to be a significant predictor of the latter.

In line with the findings from Chong et al.'s (2020) study, we then investigated perceived organisational support as a moderator in the relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour. Burnout and perceived organisational support were entered in the first step of the regression analysis. In the second step, the interaction term between burnout and perceived organisational support was entered. However, this interaction term did not produce a significant increase in the variance of work withdrawal behaviour, ΔR^2 = .0001, F (1, 153) = .014, p = .907. Therefore, perceived organisational support is not a significant moderator of the relationship between

burnout and work withdrawal behaviour, with *B* = -.002, *SE* = .013, *p* = .907. These results are summarised in Table 2 and depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 2: Moderation Analysis of Perceived Organisational Support in the Relationship Between Burnout and Work Withdrawal Behaviour

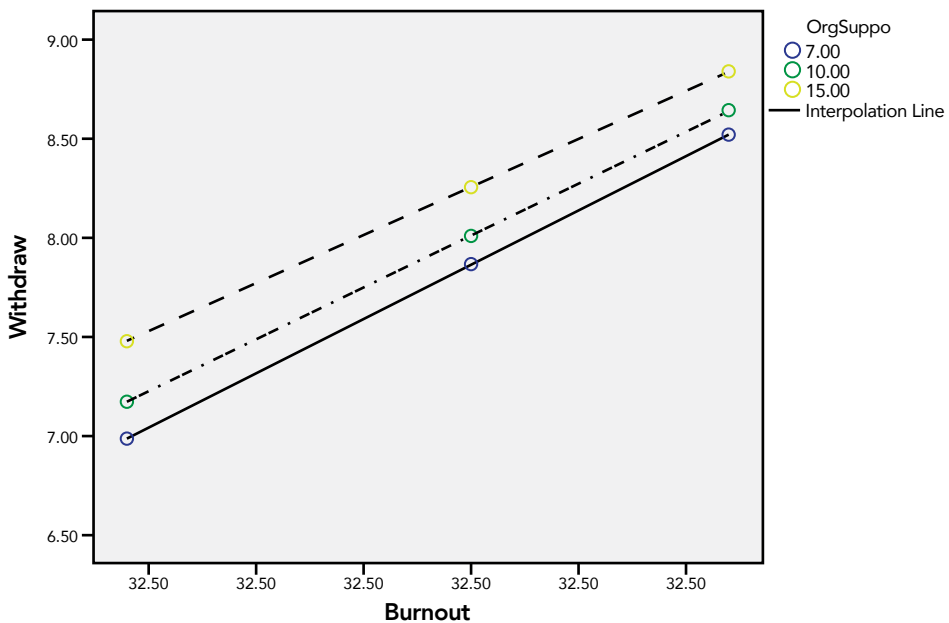| Predictor	B	SE	p	95% CI	
				Lower	*Upper*
Burnout	.119	.136	.379	-.149	.388
Perceived organisational support	.108	.513	.833	-.905	1.122
Burnout * Perceived organisational support	-.002	.013	.907	-.027	.024

Figure 2: Predicting Work Withdrawal Behaviour from Burnout and Organisational Support

Discussion

The present study uncovered the experiences and perceptions regarding COVID-19 task setbacks, burnout, and work withdrawal behaviour among telework employees in Malaysia. It also considered the moderating role of organisational support in the relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Chong et al., 2020), this study found that while burnout is positively related to, and predictive of, work withdrawal behaviour, it is negatively associated with perceived organisational support for telework tasks. These findings indicate that telework employees are psychologically withdrawing from work because they are low on resources (i.e., feeling emotionally exhausted or burnt out). Also, the potential adaptive functions of organisational support as a resource replenishment of burnout are established, reaffirming the importance of organisational support and manager's effort in improving telework effectiveness (Bentley et al., 2016; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012).

Contrary to expectations, the present study found that COVID-19 task setbacks are not significantly associated with burnout. The reason for this discrepancy is not apparent, but it could be attributed to three reasons. First, COVID-19 task setbacks may not be the only factor that can lead to burnout during the pandemic. Surveys have shown that many employees have to deal with pay cuts, unpaid leave, demotions, and even the possibility of retrenchment (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020; Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers, 2020; Lim, 2020). It is possible that the impact of COVID-19 task setbacks may conflate with these job and financial worries. Second, burnout is a reaction to prolonged or chronic job stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It is likely that the mean and median length of telework for participants in this study of about four months might not be sufficient yet to suggest the burnout syndrome. Third, having support from other sources, such as family, technology, and interpersonal relationships, may negate the effect of disruptive task-related situations due to the pandemic. Research has shown that social and emotional support has a positive association with subjective well-being, which can lessen the psychological strain experienced by employees (Bentley et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2019). Therefore, further research to fully explore these areas of ambiguity may provide more insights into this aspect.

Perhaps because organisational telework task support is a new variation of the conventional organisational support concept, the present study did not find a moderating effect of this variable on the relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour, at least cross-sectionally in Malaysia. In other words, receiving support from organisations does not necessarily lessen the effect of burnout on work withdrawal behaviour. Extant literature has established that interventions for stress and burnout rely on different processes (LaMontagne et al., 2007; LaMontagne et al., 2014; Memish et al., 2017). Before experiencing burnout, employees may benefit from organisational support because organisations can address potential job stressors before these stressors can harm them. However, when employees experience burnout and eventually withdraw from performing their work, they may

either succumb to stressors or overcome them by executing coping mechanisms (LaMontagne et al., 2007). As such, organisational support may be ineffective for helping teleworkers deal with burnout because it does not directly address their specific teleworking problems. Consequently, the process of receiving support that does not directly tackle burnout is ineffective. It can also mask the actual problem and delay the setting up of interventions or action plans to deal with the situation (Hobfoll, 2001).

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study add to the small but growing literature on the psychological and social effects of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear that adverse outcomes, such as burnout and work withdrawal behaviour, are risks under this particular work arrangement. Also, because very little research has investigated telework deployment in crisis-related contexts in Malaysia, this study contributes uniquely to the literature by offering insights into the phenomena within the local and cultural contexts.

Although the results of the present work do not yield a significant moderating effect of perceived organisational support on the relationship between burnout and work withdrawal behaviour, it is recommended that future research should not neglect this aspect because studies have largely confirmed the efficacy of organisational support in enhancing the well-being of employees. However, with modest sample size and only a single cross-sectional snapshot of the phenomena, certain methodological factors may limit the study's potential to detect significant results in all aspects of the hypotheses in this study. Therefore, it is recommended that if organisations want to benefit from telework fully, they need to be vigilant in recognising burnout and work withdrawal behaviour and be proactive in providing sufficient support to their telework employees. The more intense and prolonged the teleworking pattern, the more support the employees will need, and this requirement should be reflected in the organisation's policies, operations, and practices (Bentley et al., 2016; Chong et al., 2020).

Future research should also consider expanding the sample size with more representative samples from all states in Malaysia so that the findings can be better interpreted and generalised to all telework employees. In addition, conducting a complete replication of Chong et al.'s (2020) study within the Malaysian context may further clarify the complex interplay between COVID-19 task setbacks, burnout, work withdrawal behaviour, and perceived organisational support. Finally, similar to Chong et al.'s (2020) study, the scales that the present study used do not provide the information about the exact content of the organisational support strategies as perceived by the telework employees. This limitation can be addressed by using a more robust research instrument that can identify the telework task support strategies, and conducting field experiments to evaluate their effectiveness and causality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that burnout is positively related to work withdrawal behaviour but negatively associated with organisational support for telework employees in Malaysia. Task setbacks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, however, are not predictive of burnout. Additionally, providing non-specific organisational telework support strategies may not be recognised as an act of support to employees. Thus, it may not have the desired moderating effect on burnout and work withdrawal behaviour. Hence, investigating the exact content of organisational support strategies, expanding the demographic and socioeconomic background of employees, and testing the relationships of the variables with a more robust and rigorous research design and instruments, could bring about a deeper understanding of the work experience of teleworkers, factors that impede and enhance their performance and well-being, and how best to support them during this challenging time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated adherence to telework, with a heavy reliance on technology, digitalisation, and automation. While telework and other new forms of employment offer more flexibility and alternative working opportunities to people, they have transformed the landscape of work and the workforce and challenged the rights and responsibilities regarding employer-employee relationships. Whether or not they benefit employees is uncertain as these working modes may also become a source of new inequalities. Hence, organisations, employers, and governments have an opportunity to address these inequalities by renewing the social contract and the economic and social values that they uphold in order to strengthen the way challenges exacerbated by the pandemic can be better managed, supported, and responded.

Telework, while widely accepted now, demands at-home conditions that not all employees have. Therefore, organisations and employers have a duty of care towards their employees and need to execute their social contract by providing clear guidelines, timely information, clarification, and sufficient support that promotes a safe work environment and good mental health. Human resource policies and other policies must be aligned with these efforts and be driven by valid data and not just opinions. Those initiatives will make their implementation equitable and fair, with a long-term focus.

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